

Tis the season already? How holiday shopping now can save you money later

It might be hard to come to terms with, but the holiday shopping season is only a few weeks away due to so-called Christmas creep. While the holidays are typically filled with friends, family, food and fun, it's also one of the biggest spending periods of the year. However, there are some things you can do now to help alleviate the strain it might put on your budget.

1. Start Making a List

When it comes to holiday shopping, staying organized is key. Taking the time to sit down and write out a shopping list can help you avoid making costly, unnecessary purchases. You can even take non-gift related purchases, like decorations or meals, into account. With this information you should be able to keep track of your holiday-related expenses, build yourself a budget, and keep yourself focused in a hectic shopping environment. Proper preparation now can wind up saving you tons later on.

2. Subscribe to Newsletters

If you already have a pretty good idea of where you'll be doing your shopping, consider subscribing to those store's mailing lists and social media channels. Retailers tend to provide their subscribers with special deals and early alerts on upcoming sales. And if that wasn't enough, some brands will even reward you with a coupon (typically anywhere between 10%-15% off one purchase) for signing up or subscribing. All of this can provide you with some great opportunities to knock out some of your holiday shopping for less.

3. Sign Up for Layaway

An often overlooked tool, layaway allows consumers to spread out the cost of big-ticket items over the span of several months. When opting to place an item on layaway, you'll be required to make some sort of down payment (the amount of which will vary from store to store) and then make smaller payments over time. Unlike credit card purchases however, layaway payments are interest-free (though there may be fees, always read the fine print before signing up). Buying something on layaway will also ensure that it will still be around come the busy holiday shopping season. Just keep in mind that not every store offers layaway and policies vary from store to store. That said, if you're looking for a way to make that new TV or video game system a little more affordable, layaway might be a good option for you.

4. Buy Some Things Early

Despite the massive amount of savings buzz Black Friday generates year after year, there are some items that rarely (if ever) get marked down on the big day. Gift cards, vacation packages, furniture, designer clothing and high-end electronics are all examples of products that typically don't receive any special treatment during the holiday season. This means you could find some

savings by purchasing these items ahead of time, whether when they are on sale, or by financing them through a credit card or the previously suggested layaway option.

If you decide to use a credit card to finance your purchases, consider coming up with a plan to pay it off so you don't have to deal with the dreaded holiday debt hangover, and wind up carrying that debt far into the next year. This calculator can help you come up with a plan to pay it off. Also, be careful about using too much of your available balance, as doing so can have a negative impact on your credit scores, especially if you're maxed out. You can see how your debt is affecting your credit by getting your credit scores for free on Credit.com, and watching them update monthly.

While the holidays might be a stressful time for shoppers, you can opt out of the madness by planning ahead and getting your shopping done sooner. Not only will you find yourself more relaxed, but you could greatly decrease the chances you take on debt this holiday season. Remember, the holidays are about spending time with your loved ones, not scouring the aisles for expensive gifts.

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